

**“Putin Down Protest”:**  
Is Widespread Mobilization Possible in the  
Shadow of the Oil Curse?

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## Abstract

Under what conditions are protests more likely to occur? Social movement literature has traditionally been dominated by three frameworks: the framing process; resource mobilization; and political opportunity structures (McAdam et al. 1996, 7). These approaches attempt to explain the motivations behind protests and what form they take; however, what is seldom studied in the social movement literature is the role the resource curse plays in the likelihood of protests occurring. Some research analyzes how the resource curse affects the likelihood of civil war and other forms of armed violence, and it is plausible that this relationship between civil conflict and natural resources would extend to protest behavior as well (Fearon 2004; Lujala et al. 2005; Asal et al. 2016).

In this paper I analyze the geographic variation of Russia's protests by overlaying Lankina and Voznayas' (2015) data set detailing protest events onto the PRIO-Grid's spatial data set (Tollefsen et al. 2012). While the results show that oil has no effect on the likelihood of protests, the presence of oil seems to have a negative effect on the number of protesters that participated. This indicates an interesting repression angle that can be an inspiration for future research and can be a worthwhile contribution to conflict literature.

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As recently as spring of 2017, Russian protesters filled the streets in response to the sentencing of Alexei Navalny, an opposition leader and legitimate threat to Putin, to his second prison term of the year (Reiter and Osborn 2017). These protests were some of the largest since 2012, reaffirming that Russia is not a stable regime (Reiter and Osborn 2017). In the past decade alone, Russia has experienced a surprisingly large rise in the number of mass protests considering the Kremlin’s increased efforts to discourage political opposition. The protests in December 2011 in response to the Russian *Duma* elections were particularly disruptive due to the large turnout and caught both foreign and internal spectators off-guard (Reiter and Osborn 2017). Collective action is a particular concern for the Putin regime as widespread protests were a significant factor in the fall of the Soviet Union. Under what conditions, then, are protests in Russia more or less likely to occur?

Not only is the recent boom in Russian protest incidents an interesting trend in and of itself, there seems to be a high amount of geographic variation in where Russians are conducting these protests. Lankina and Voznaya (2015) argue that regional protest variations are of particular importance to understanding how collective action trends factor into the possibility of political change. As such, analyzing what fundamental variances different regions of Russia have and how these variations factor into social movement mobilization is important for understanding protest behavior in non-democratic regimes and the sustainability of these regimes. There are a variety of factors that could be driving these regional variations of protest trends in Russia, and one of the most interesting variations between Russia’s regions is the presence of petroleum deposits and petroleum development. Additionally, Russia’s regions have significant economic, social, and political differences (Lankina and Voznaya 2015).

Overshadowing all of these regional differences, though, is a central government that has shown some very alarming foreign and domestic policy practices in recent years. By analyzing Russian protest trends, valuable insight might be gleaned into the potential for positive political change through peaceful social movements.

### **The “Big Three” of the Protest Literature**

In the social movements literature, there are three main theories relevant to predicting the frequency, location, and magnitude of political action: grievances, resource mobilization, and political opportunity structures (POS). Grievances generally operate as the essential, initial motive for social movements (Simmons 2014). Resource mobilization and POS often shape the form protest takes (Tarrow 2011). One common theme uniting recent work in all three approaches, however, is the realization that these trends vary within states. These sub-national variations lead to regional and group differences in protest dynamics.

At the core of any protest is a set of grievances. Grievances are generally experienced in the form of political, social, and economic inequalities and deprivations relative to the rest of the society (Gurr 1993), and grievances are a core motivator for individual protest behavior (Dalton et al. 2009). In terms of protest behavior, participation in collective action is generally in response to “an objective state of disadvantage,” which could include individual dissatisfaction with their current physical, economic, political, or social conditions (Opp 2000). These are strong motivators for collective action, but perceived, or imagined, injustice and inequality may be more important than real material conditions, especially when considering the scale of protest (Zomeran et al. 2008).

A vast array of earlier work in the protest literature, though, finds that individual grievances have little impact on the likelihood of social conflict (Collier and Hoeffler 2004;

Fearson and Laitin 2003). Østby (2008), in a rebuttal to many large-N studies that conclude inequality does not substantially increase the probability of civil conflict, argues that instead of examining the individual aspect of inequality researchers should focus on inequalities between groups. In fact, group inequalities and grievances have reemerged in the conflict literature as a fundamental mobilization factor for civil conflict (Cederman et al. 2013; Deiwiks et al. 2012). These studies argue that collective action must be analyzed in terms of horizontal inequality, or systematic features that reinforce inequalities between different groups, as civil conflict is group conflict, not conflict between individuals (Østby 2008).

However, an aggrieved group is only able to mobilize if they have the resources to sustain collective action (McCarthy and Zald 1977). Resources necessary to sustain collective action include financial and physical capital, human labor and skills, some form of communicative system like social media, and moral support and legitimacy (Edwards and McCarthy 2004).<sup>1</sup> When populations have low levels of useful resources, social movements lack the capacity to form any substantial collective action which makes this behavior significantly less appealing and causing those social movements that do emerge to be vulnerable to state suppression (Dalton et. al. 2009). Another important component of the resource mobilization approach maintains that resources are spread unequally throughout societies, and control of the resources needed for the continuation of collective action are distributed unequally among social groups (Edwards and McCarthy 2004). Edwards and McCarthy (2004) also hold that middle-class groups are the group most suited to protest behavior as they have access to substantial resources necessary for social movements. Beyond that, groups in more urbanized areas might be

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<sup>1</sup> Edwards and McCarthy (2004) detail many more resources and identify five broad types of resources: moral, cultural, socio-organizational, material, and human.

more likely to protest, since urbanization generally brings with it a variety of resources like social connectivity and economic support (Jenkins 1983).

Thus, the resource mobilization approach suggests that democratic regimes should provide ample resources for protest movements to sustain themselves. Democratic societies generally have higher levels of development which provides higher levels of resources necessary for collective action. However, the third major social movement approach, political opportunity structures, shows that social movements in democratic regimes have access to other forms of political action (e.g. lobbying) which reduces the necessity and efficacy of protest, thereby making the protest option less attractive (Dalton et al. 2009). In this sense, democratic states and democratic opportunity structures become a resource for social movements that drives down the need for protests. As a result, non-democratic regimes that attempt to appear democratic by allowing opposing parties and elections but without providing democratic resources, like Russia, could be a breeding ground for protest movements.

While resource mobilization often determines the efficacy of collective action, political opportunity structures have a significant impact on the form that collective action takes. POS are “compromised of specific configurations of resources, institutional arrangements, and historical precedents for social mobilization” (Kitschelt 1986). Under political opportunity theory, the polity of a state directly impacts the grievances, such as exclusion, that social movements mobilize around, and the organization of the polity makes certain forms of collective action more appealing, and sometimes more effective, than other forms (Meyer 2004). Some work postulates that opportunity structures that are relatively open experience increased levels of peaceful protest because individuals and groups can make political demands without fear of retribution (Tarrow 2011). As a result, POS theory predicts that as political institutions become more democratic the

amount of protests will rise. In contrast, more closed systems are characterized by fewer conduits for public influence in the political process and restricted civil liberties which forces social movements outside of conventional forms of political demonstration and sometimes escalating social mobilization past protest and into the realm of conflict (Asal et al. 2016; Kitschelt 1986).

POS which have a mix of closed and open features though have consistently been the most likely to experience protest (Kitschelt 1986). Saleyhan and Linebarger (2015), analyzing the relationship between elections and the magnitude of social conflict in Africa, find that elections caused increased levels of protest and other forms of collective action in electoral autocracies.<sup>2</sup> Oftentimes, these autocratic regimes allow fraudulent elections to satisfy a variety of democratic demands, but this institutional inconsistency is dangerous in that rival parties and oppositions can more easily organize and mobilize in times of elections (Salehyan and Linebarger 2015). Open systems decrease protest due to availability of other conventional channels while closed regimes do not permit their public to protest. The social movement literature indicates that there is something about this middle ground which makes protests the most appealing and efficient form of collective action.

### **The Role of the Resource Curse in Regional Protest Variability**

Seldom studied in the protest literature is the role of the resource curse in mobilizing protests. The resource curse is defined as the “adverse effects of a country’s national resource wealth on its economic, social, or political well-being” (Ross 2015). While there is little literature on the resource curse-protest link, the conflict literature does contain a vast amount of research linking natural resources like alluvial diamonds, petroleum, and nonfuel materials to the

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<sup>2</sup> Electoral autocracies are regimes that “conduct regular multiparty elections at all levels of governments yet violate basic democratic standards in serious and systematic ways” (Schedler 2010).

advent of civil war and armed conflict (Asal et al. 2016; Fearon 2004; Lujala et al. 2005). Often, natural resources damage political institutions and reinforce non-democratic regimes, which in turn leads to higher corruption and exacerbated grievances- factors that we should expect to motivate protest movements (Andersen et al. 2013). Furthermore, a number of studies have found that rebel groups use natural resources to finance conflict activities and enhance the sustainability of their social movements, which is in tune with the resource mobilization literature (Collier and Hoeffler 2004; Lujala et al. 2005; Ross 2004). Conversely, high levels of natural resources allow closed POS, non-democratic regimes to better weaken or crush any substantial social movements that rise against them, and the availability of resource rents supports the development of a rentier state which stresses more investment in regime-preserving activities (Caselli and Cunningham 2009; Ross 2004).<sup>3</sup>

Even though resource curse is a broad term that encompasses a variety of non-renewable natural resources, the strongest evidence indicates that one type of resource wealth has the most important effects: petroleum (Basedau and Lay 2009; Ross 2015). Research in this area has found that oil leads to more armed and violent conflict partly because it makes central governments prime targets for insurgents to loot and to take over petroleum production for themselves (Asal et al. 2016; Collier and Hoeffler 2004). Only onshore oil deposits have been found to have a robust effect on a state's risk of conflict as they are more easily looted than offshore deposits (Lujala 2010), and onshore oil deposits appear to instigate conflict more often in regions that are poor in relation to their state's national average (Østby et al. 2009).

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<sup>3</sup> A Rentier state is a state who “dominates society because of its easy access to significant economic resources that are independent from broad domestic taxation” (Gervasoni 2010).



The link between the elements of the resource curse, particularly grievances and closed POS, and non-democratic regimes would suggest that protest likelihood should be affected just as the likelihood of civil war is. The resource curse exacerbates grievances through the application of the rentier state theory, which claims that regimes who extensively rely on external revenue, like oil income, rather than taxation are better able to repress opposition and provide benefits to certain citizens and populations thereby reinforcing inequalities (Wright et al. 2014). Sub-national variations in the presence of natural resources are essential to the development of a rentier state as natural resources allows some local governments to exert more control over the population by using the natural resource industry as an economic weapon and closing POS. Recent research highlights that the location of oil is particularly relevant for the likelihood of civil war and other armed conflict particularly when an area contains both oil and politically excluded groups (Asal et al. 2016; Cotet and Tsui 2013).

Regimes who are not reliant on its populace as a significant source of revenue are less likely to address claims of grievances put forth by its populace (Gervasoni 2010) and more likely to use repression techniques to keep their primary funding source (i.e. natural resources) in operation (Jensen and Wantchekon 2004). Regional variations of POS may also be influenced by the presence of oil wealth as areas with more oil production will have less need to include the population in the political process. Since the location of oil has been shown to have an effect on the likelihood of conflict, it would indicate that areas with oil and excluded social or ethnic groups should experience much higher levels of supervision and suppression in an effort to stop protests from emerging. If the population cannot express their grievances through protests and experience significant repression, this may influence the form collective action takes by allowing no positive collective action to occur and escalating social mobilization straight to violent

conflict (Asal et. al. 2016; Salehyan and Linebarger 2015). This in turn would drive down the likelihood of protests in favor of armed conflict. Thus, I hypothesize:

**Hypothesis 1:** Regions with more oil production are less likely to experience protests.

Along with protest likelihood itself, there could be effects on protests that actually occur. Applying rentier theory to POS, governments who expansively rely on oil revenues as their primary source of revenue will seek to use this fiscal power to institute regime preserving activities particularly in regions with more natural resource presence. Regime preserving activities include the establishment of coercive apparatuses to conduct surveillance on the population, fiscal pressure on political opposition, and labor control in oil producing industries (Gervasoni 2010). Due to these activities, the costs of collective action rise significantly in regions with oil production. The government could crack down heavily on protests which would increase the physical risks of collective action. Beyond the risk of death and injury, the state controls the oil industry, and, in regions with heavy oil production, a majority of the populace could be employed in this industry. People participating in collective action could expect backlash from the regime including losing their job, suppression, and surveillance. Furthermore, the state would most likely have a broken legal system, which it would use to place legal pressure like imprisonment or lawsuits on those who protest. Since the costs of protesting should increase in these areas, I hypothesize:

**Hypothesis 2:** If protests do occur, regions with more oil production will see less protesters attend protests.

## **Methodology**

To test my hypotheses, I will utilize the PRIO-Grid Database (Tollefsen et al., 2012). PRIO-Grid is a spatial data set that splits geographic territories around the world into 64,818 distinct units or cells that are roughly 55km x 55km in area. I will be limiting the cells to only the

Russian cells covering the years 2007 to 2012 as Russia provides ample geographic variation in protests and the presence of oil. Thus, the unit of analysis for this project is cell-year, leaving me with a total of five years in the analysis.

### *Dependent Variables*

In order to code for the *number of Russian protest events per cell year*, I utilized a study conducted by Lankina and Voznaya (2015). Their study utilizes a dataset compiled from information found at *namarsh.ru*, which is a Russian media website that reports protest events with web links to the “original press coverage of a given event.”<sup>4</sup> The baseline data records protests beginning in March of 2007 through December 2012, giving us the timeframe for this study. The location of the protests is the most important aspect of the protests in the context of this project, so I matched the locations of the protests to the different PRIO-Grid data sets in order to get a count of the number of protest events per cell per year.

Additionally, I analyzed the *number of people per protest* as a second dependent variable. This is important to include in this project as the presence of petroleum might have indirect effects to protests beyond just the likelihood of a protest occurring. I continue to use the Lankina and Voznaya (2015) study to constitute this variable exploiting the detailed report of each protest event.<sup>5</sup> To increase the robustness of my results, I will use both the maximum and minimum estimates from Lankina and Voznaya (2015).

Given the continuous nature of my dependent variables, I analyzed my data using a linear regression model. I also did robust clustering on cell, which acts as a control for any cell-specific explanations not included in the empirical model.

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4 Each data entry has numerous details including protester turnout, underlying inspiration of the protest, and whether suppression occurred (Lankina and Voznaya 2015, 331).

5 “ Refer to footnote 4

### *Independent Variable*

To determine my main variable of interest, I included the PRIO-Grid's petroleum data set to identify *regional petroleum dependency*, originally from Lujala, Rød, and Thieme (2007). This measure is a static dummy variable of on-land oil reserves found within each individual grid cell, identifying every petroleum deposit on the planet that has ever been publicly found. It is important to narrow down the analysis only to on-land oil reserves as only on-land oil deposits have been found to have an impact on the advent of collective action (Lujala 2010). I use the static petroleum dataset because the PRIO-Grid's yearly petroleum data set is only updated to 2003. While the static measure is not ideal, it is the best that can be done with the data that is available. Other recent studies, such as Asal et al. (2016), follow a similar practice providing some continuity with the rest of the literature.

### *Control Variables*

As a proxy for *political exclusion*, I utilized the Geo-referencing Ethnic Power Relations (EPR) 2014 dataset (Vogt et al. 2015). In the social movement literature, exclusion generally exacerbates or causes other grievances, and politically excluded groups have no outlet to remedy these other grievances. In fact, Asal et al.'s 2016 study found that oil only increased conflict likelihood when it was located in areas where an ethnic group was politically excluded. As a result, I can use *political exclusion* as a proxy for grievances and control for that part of the grievance theory of protest. The excluded ethnic groups data set counts the number of discriminated or powerless ethnic groups by location in relation to more politically pertinent groups settled in each grid cell per year. The data is available for my time frame of 2007 to 2012, so I was able to use the GeoEPR data to correspond with every year of the protest event data.

The second control variable I included is *population density* per cell found on the PRIO-Grid (CIESIN 2005). Population was chosen as a control variable because the population of an area can serve as a proxy for how urbanized an area is. More urban areas may be more likely to experience protests independent from factors like oil production (Lankina and Voznaya 2015), so I will control for urbanization to try and narrow down the causation to oil dependency. I used the population total dataset from Gridded Population of the World Dataset as it estimates population per grid cell as recently as 2010 (CIESIN 2005).

As for my third control variable, I controlled for *economic development*, and I will be using the PRIO-Grid's data on nighttime light emission as a proxy for economic development (Elvidge et al. 2014). I could have used a measure like GDP to determine economic development, but this only allows me to see economic development at a national scale while I need a sub-national, regional economic measure. The PRIO-Grid contains an economic measure called gross cell product (GCP) which shows economic output per individual cell. I chose not to use this measure though because the presence of oil could make a region seem extremely wealthy when in reality the overwhelming majority of the population lives in abject poverty and the wealth is concentrated in the hands of a few elites. Nighttime light emission though is heavily varied by region and will allow me better geographic control. Since only relatively richer and more developed areas are able to maintain steady nighttime light emission over a larger area, this proxy should be an adequate representation of economic development per grid cell, and this approach has been used by some economic geographers (Sutton et al. 2007). The nightlight emission data runs from 1992 to 2013, so I will be able to control for economic development each year of my timeframe.

Beyond socioeconomic factors, I controlled for the *distance from the capital* and *distance from the state's border*. I included these measures as past work in the sub-national conflict literature have shown that distance from the capital and proximity to borders directly impacts the duration of civil conflict and the ability of a state to exercise its power (Buhaug et al. 2009). For these variables, I again utilized the PRIO-Grid's data (*bdist1*) which is originally from Weidmann et al. (2010). The data gives the spherical distance from the cell centroid to the national capital city and the border of the nearest land-contiguous country.

## **Results**

Regarding my first hypothesis, the analysis indicated that the presence of oil had no significant effect on the number of protests. This could be attributed to the government being able to successfully co-opt locals and disincentive protest behavior through the use of oil revenue even in regions with little petroleum production. Therefore, the local population will not exhibit protest behavior because the state has already removed that option from them. Regions with oil will have more access to oil profits and more incentive to repress protests to ensure oil production is unimpeded.

As for my second hypothesis, the analysis did result in a statistically significant and negative coefficient for the minimum number of protesters and the maximum number of protesters. While oil had no effect on the likelihood of protest, oil had a significant negative impact on the number of people who show out to protest: the presence of oil caused the number of people who protested to decline. Since both the maximum and minimum number of protestors was negatively affected, this provides some robustness to the results. This seems to indicate that regions with oil experience significant governmental repression and co-optation. Tying this result back to my theory, the state would institute regime preserving activities such as a coercive

apparatus and financial and legal pressure on political opposition and organizations.

Furthermore, populations in oil producing regions would experience an increase in the costs of protesting relative to protesters in regions with more diversified economies. These costs could include loss of employment in the oil industry, threat of violence against the protester and the protester's family, and incarceration.

Predictably, the majority of our control variables were found to be statistically significant which is consistent with other research done on protest trends. The presence of an excluded social group in a cell had a slight positive effect on the likelihood of protest but had no measurable effect on protest turnout. Consistent with other literature, economic development was negatively associated with protest probability and protest turnout. Additionally, protests were more likely to occur the closer the cell was to Moscow and protest turnout increased significantly around Moscow. On the same note, there were more protest incidents with larger turnouts the farther away they were from Russia's borders. This could be attributed to the fact that Russia's border regions are traditionally sparsely populated. Finally, urbanization had no discernable statistical significance in the likelihood of protest or protest turnout.

**Table 1: Protest incidents and number of protesters; Russia 2007-2012**  
(linear regression with robust standard errors clustered on cell).

	Number of Protests	Number of Protesters (Min. est.)	Number of Protesters (Max. est.)
<i>Reg. Petroleum Dependency</i>	0.0002 (0.0054)	-0.1723** (0.0560)	-0.1698* (0.0560)
<i>Excluded Ethnicities</i>	0.0040* (0.0022)	0.1563 (0.0984)	0.1543 (0.0972)
<i>Population Density</i>	0.0001 (0.0001)	0.0031 (0.0025)	0.0031 (0.0024)
<i>Economic Development</i>	-0.0681** (0.0341)	-2.558* (1.350)	-2.534* (1.330)
<i>Distance from Capital</i>	-4.24*** (0.0000)	-0.0002*** (0.00003)	-0.0002*** (0.00003)
<i>Distance from Border</i>	-0.00002*** (0.0000)	-0.0006*** (0.0002)	-0.0006*** (0.0002)
<i>Constant</i>	0.0312*** (0.0069)	1.070*** (0.2397)	1.058*** (0.2369)
Observations	8717	8717	8717
F	4.94***	5.12***	5.12***
R-Squared	0.007	0.0063	0.0063

Note: Robust standard error clustered on cell. \*  $p < .10$ , \*\*  $p < .05$ ,  
\*\*\*  $p < .01$



## **Conclusions and Future Research**

The results of this research are extremely preliminary. I faced considerable problems collecting data, and it is likely that there were errors in the geographic coding of the protest events. With that being said, the results are encouraging even if they did not support our main hypothesis. There seems to be an interesting repression angle that would be worth further investigation. While there is work on the relationship between government repression and protest (Davenport and McCarthy 2005; Ericson and Doyle 1999), there seems to be little tangible, quantitative research on the interaction between the resource curse, oil specifically, and governmental repression of protest. I believe continuing with this research would be a valuable contribution to the social movement and conflict literature.

Moving forward with this project, I would like to obtain better data for my variables and expand our analysis to other regions of the world that experience problems with the oil curse and the perpetuation of non-democratic regimes. By expanding our analysis, we will be able to acquire more cases which will further strengthen our causal relationship. More importantly, utilizing more sophisticated geographic information system software such as ArcGIS to accurately code geographical coordinates for protest events will be essential for the continuation of this research. The time frame of our data was limited due to the original protest data from Lankina and Voznaya (2015), so finding a more complete data set for Russian protest events might be necessary to yield more accurate results. Another obstacle to obtaining protest data for certain regions of the world is the lack of incentive non-democratic regimes have to report protests. Most protest data sets utilize media coverage (Lankina and Vozanaya 2015) to constitute their data which can be problematic. Formulating other methods of obtaining reliable protest data will be vital to further research on this topic.

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